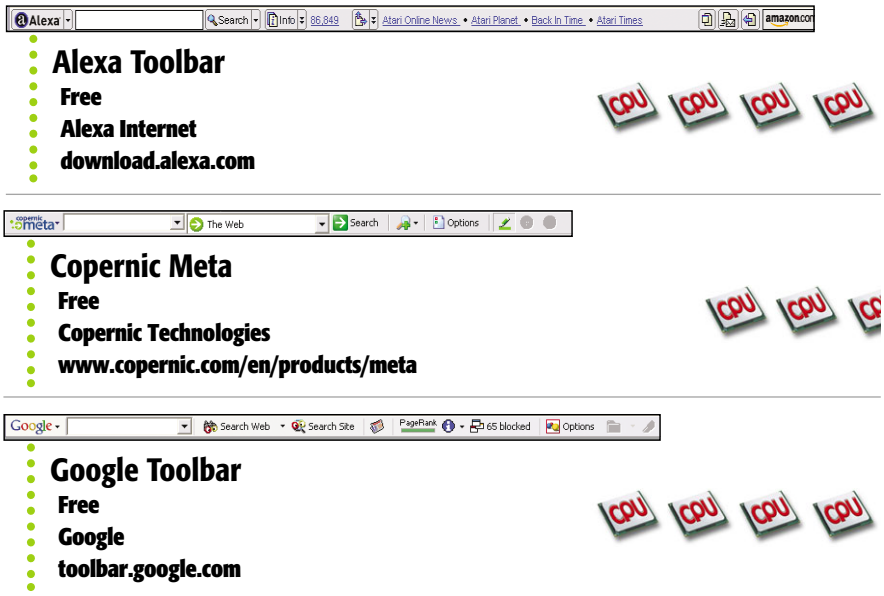
Browser Toolbar Roundup

Searches & More Done Your Way

No matter which search engine you prefer, adding a browser toolbar to your Web browser can make searches more efficient and informative. Just type a search phrase into the always-present toolbar to query your favorite search site.

The toolbars I reviewed also include a history of recent searches and can highlight Web pages where your search keyword is mentioned. Most browser toolbars also add a pop-up ad blocker. The blockers aren't infallible, but they do a respectable job.

These toolbars are free, and unless stated otherwise, work with Internet Explorer 5.0 or later only. Because of IE's security flaws (and simply as a matter of choice), it's unfortunate most popular browser toolbars don't support other browsers.



Alexa Internet Alexa Toolbar

The first version of this browser toolbar was released in 1997. Amazon.com acquired it in 1999. Today, Alexa offers a unique mix of features for Webmasters and avid surfers.

As you browse the Web, the toolbar shows data about sites you visit, including a Traffic Rank, or its relative popularity. Traffic Rank is useful for Webmasters looking for data from respectable sites. (There's some debate if this feature qualifies Alexa as spyware.) Alexa also delivers contact information for the site's owner and related sites. The latter, culled from browser traffic analysis, is useful when you're hunting for more data on a topic. Web You Made is an intriguing variation on related searches that recommends sites based on your recent activity.

Alexa's default search engine is Google, but the output doesn't look like an ordinary Google search. Alexa adds thumbnail previews of each hit and replaces Google ads with ads for products at Amazon.com.

The toolbar includes a PopUp Manager, a Tell A Friend button, and access to the Internet Archive's WayBack Machine, which lets you view past versions of the page your viewing.

The Related Links feature makes Alexa one of the most valuable toolbars for general surfing. (As we went to press, Amazon .com also made it's A9 toolbar available.)

Copernic Technologies Copernic Meta

Copernic Meta also isn't tied to just one search engine, but it misses the mark as an effective search aid. It's also the only toolbar that didn't include a pop-up blocker.

By default, Copernic's proprietary search engine delivers search results, loading the top of a search results page with as many as 12 sponsored links. Other built-in searches have vague names, such as Shopping and Images, which don't tell you which search engines they use. You get the feeling the toolbar doesn't favor the best sites but those with affiliate programs that pay its maker.

The Add Search Engine function is useful; it lets you add more than 50 predefined search engines to the toolbar. If your preferred search engine isn't listed, you can add it. By replacing the default set of search engines with ones you choose, Meta becomes a more useful tool. You can also define keyboard shortcuts, for instance typing **t toolbar** to search Teoma.

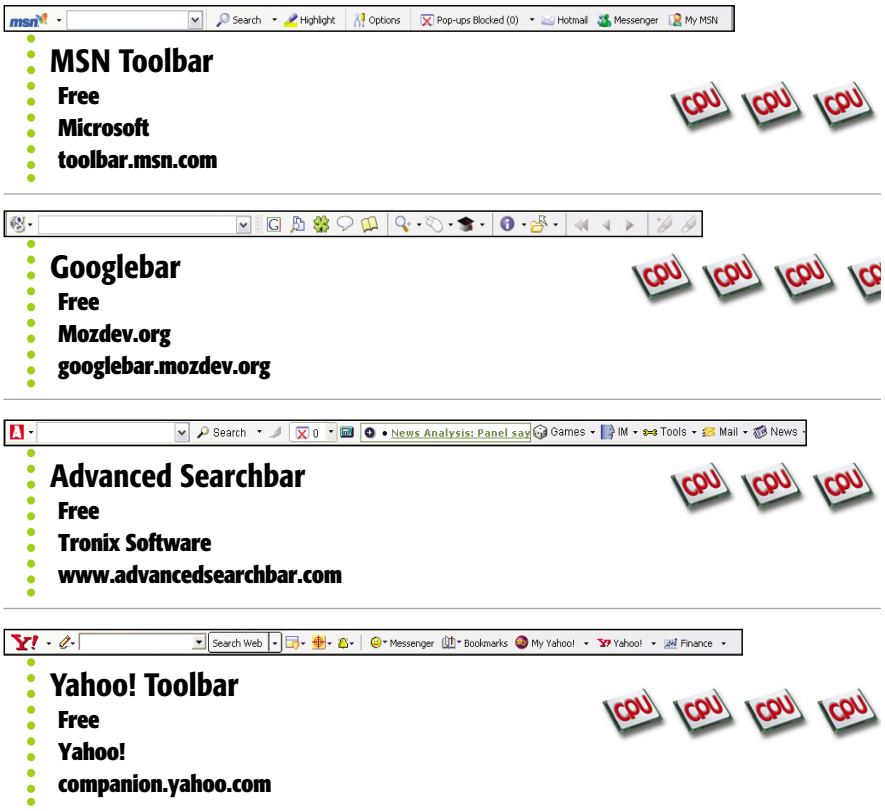
Copernic Meta has potential, but it needs to shed the seemingly sponsored links and add a pop-up blocker.

Google Toolbar

If Google is your favorite search engine, Google Toolbar is a great addition. With a click you can search Google's database or limit a search to the current site, Google's newsgroup archive, image archive, and other databases. There's also a Search History feature to access previous lookups.

For Webmasters, the toolbar is the easiest way to find out your site's (and other sites you visit) Google PageRank, a metric that's essential to know to increase traffic to your site. Google Toolbar also includes other useful tools, such as clicking the Up button to take you up one level in the site you're browsing. The AutoFill button instantly fills out Web forms with more smarts than IE's form-filling function. Google Toolbar is also available in dozens of languages.

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect



Google Toolbar simply makes a great search engine even better. It isn't loaded with every conceivable feature, but it's a must for Google addicts.

Microsoft MSN Toolbar

Microsoft's MSN Search (search.msn.com) probably isn't many users' first choice; its popularity is more likely due to it being the default tool of IE's Search pane. If you like MSN Search and the Search pane isn't enough, there's MSN Toolbar.

The basic functionality provides access to MSN Search, your search history, and a pop-up blocker. The highlight viewer is the only standout function. It highlights your search phrase on the Web page and shows a thumbnail view of the entire page with the keyword highlighted every time. A click scrolls the page to each use of that keyword.

MSN Toolbar doesn't do much else. It's essentially a functional, basic search toolbar. There are buttons to jump to MSN Messenger chat software and Hotmail, but it doesn't indicate if there's email waiting in your Hotmail account. The toolbar does have a few customization options, letting you remove some buttons and disable the pop-up blocker, but if you want a toolbar you can really tweak, look elsewhere.

Mozdev.org Googlebar

Don't use IE but want a Google toolbar? Googlebar is an open-source project that emulates the functionality of the Google Toolbar in Netscape, Mozilla, and Firefox. It provides quick access to Google, complete with search-term highlighting, recent searches, and access to Google's databases.

Googlebar may be more thorough than Google's own toolbar in some respects, as it provides access to lesser-used Google functions, such as University Search and regional searches with Google Local. Googlebar doesn't provide data about sites' PageRank ratings or a form-filling tool, however.

The Googlebar site includes links to other toolbars for Netscape and Mozilla, including a Yahoo! Companion emulator (companion.mozdev.org) and EasySearch (easysearch.mozdev.org), which works with many search engines.

Tronix Software Advanced Searchbar

Advanced Searchbar isn't provided by or tied to a particular search site. Instead, it provides easy access to many search engines, news sites, and Web email providers (nearly 100 in all). The app provides search history, a pop-up blocker, and a Translate button that can translate a page to many languages without going to a translation site. You can select which search engines, news sites, and Internet games appear in the toolbar's menus, but only from a predefined list.

The app also has one-click access to IM clients, Control Panel, Registry Editor, and other Windows tools. The app's news tickers are a handy (but sometimes distracting) feature that scrolls news headlines in the toolbar in your choice of categories, including business, entertainment, and tech news.

The program was a bit glitchy. At one point, it was confused if some features were on or off, such as when the news ticker only appeared when turned off. It also blocked legitimate new windows. The app is worth a try, though, especially if you like to try your luck at various search engines.

Yahoo! Toolbar

Yahoo! Toolbar provides easy access to Yahoo!'s sprawling site. If you frequently log into Yahoo! for stock quotes, email, or to play games, YT makes it easier. It can also alert you when new messages arrive in your Yahoo! Mail account.

The toolbar's heart is Pop-Up Blocker and Anti-Spy. Pop-Up Blocker works admirably, but the real gem is Anti-Spy. It quickly searches your PC for adware and spyware. It worked as advertised, detecting and removing spyware on a test system that had recently tested clean.

YT offers myriad options to customize, including which reference and personal tools appear. You can also switch preset configurations, and there's a Bookmark Manager and pane to monitor your Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. YT is handy for Yahoo! addicts, but like Yahoo! itself, it seems to try to do too many things at once.

Raising The Bar

If I could add only one bar, I'd pick Alexa; its unbiased recommendation of sites is just the thing when you're searching. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

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